The Interdisciplinary Journal of International Studies
IJIS Volume 8 Number 1 2012

ESSAY

The Existentialistic Premise of the Thermonuclear Dilemma

Andreas Aagaard Nøhr[1]
Graduate Student, Development and International Relations, Aalborg University
MScEcon International Relations with Distinction, University of Wales, Aberystwyth
Email: andreas@aagaard-nohr.dk

ABSTRACT. This essay explores the thermonuclear dilemma in a timeless and universal philosophical context – a purely epistemological plain. Drawing upon ideas from Rousseau, classical realists such as Morgenthau and Niebuhr, and contemporary thinkers such as Bent Flyvbjerg, this essay first explores the theoretical possibilities of a world state; secondly, it explores the possibilities for transformation and mechanisms of change; and thirdly, it reflects upon some philosophical concerns with regard to contemporary opportunities and imminent difficulties. Ultimately, the essay argues that the thermonuclear dilemma is the existential premise for international politics and should therefore be at the forefront of any theorizing of international politics.

> In politics as in morals, the more we enlarge our knowledge,
> the more we are faced to recognise the extent of our misery.
> — Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1917)

With the advent of thermonuclear weaponry in the 1950s, the international world of nation-states, faced a dilemma: in a world characterized by anarchy the possibility of waging war now came with the risk of mutual assured destruction. On a global scale this would mean total nuclear annihilation. Up until this revolutionary event, Realists such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans J. Morgenthau – drawing on Weber's writings on *Machtpolitik* and Nietzsche's considerations of the "will-to-power" – had tried to explain the returning phenomenon of international conflict and furthermore proposed normative arguments about how states, under anarchical conditions, always should be ready to wage war in the name of human survival (Craig 2003: 32-53, 74-92, 93-116; Craig 2007: 195-215). But, as the consequences of an all-out nuclear war became more apparent, both scholars came to realize that their political philosophy, in its normative sense, was collapsing (Craig 2003: 115-116, 164-165). In a word, maintaining the Realist *ultima ratio* in an international system of nation states with the ability to end the world became "absurd" (Morgenthau 1961: 232). Living in a world organized in such a way that the underlying material premise became a seed for its destruction, became unbearable for both theorists. Determined to avoid a third

ISSN: 1602-9097 (print)
ISSN: 1604-7095 (online)

AALBORG UNIVERSITY

world war, they combined this normative consideration with Realist pessimism about radical solutions to solve the thermonuclear dilemma (Craig 2003: 164-165). Thus, given that the outcome of this dilemma is undesirable, they asked themselves: *what, if anything, can we do about it*?

International anarchy constituted the very center of the problem: that is to say, no anarchy – no risk of major war. Hence, the solution was clear: *eliminate international anarchy*. The thermonuclear dilemma thus made the need for transformation of international politics evermore evident: transcending anarchy for the sake of avoiding world war three became the prime concern for both Niebuhr and Morgenthau. Yet, despite their efforts, they only got to have a "glimpse" at what was to come – *the establishment of a new global Leviathan* (Craig 2003: xv-xvii).

Drawing particularly on the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, I seek to do three things in this essay: first, examine the theoretical possibility of a world state and a social contract that engages with the problem of world community, as defined by Morgenthau; second, explore the prospects of transformation and mechanisms of change; and third, reflect upon some philosophical considerations with regard to contemporary opportunities and future difficulties. The overall argument being that, a world state is *the* only liable solution to the thermonuclear dilemma and that it remains obtainable through rational means under conditions of stable power relations. Yet, the asymmetrical relationship between power and rationality will eventually bring an end to such a world state, which in the end leads me to suggest that the nature of the thermonuclear dilemma is *existential*.

Furthermore, it should be added that Rousseau himself of course had nothing to say about the thermonuclear dilemma, *how could he*? That, however, does not mean that Rousseau's social thought and philosophy cannot teach us anything about the way *we* can think and deal with this dilemma. Having a a-historical and logical/epistemic approach to International Political Thought, Rousseau is engaged with as if his thought is apart of a universal and timeless debate about international politics. As such, this essay is theoretical and deductive and thus logical arguments take prerogative over historical ones. And in this context the essay asks the question of: what can we, inspired by Rousseau's social philosophy, say about the present problem of the thermonuclear dilemma?

The Theoretical Possibility of a World State

Scholarly effort to solve the thermonuclear dilemma has been few and sparse. Morgenthau examines three solutions to anarchy in *Politics Among Nations*, i.e., peace through *limitation*, *transformation* or *accommodation* (Morgenthau 1948: Chapters 18-25). However, as it becomes clear throughout his investigation, the only reliable way to ensure peace is by transforming international politics: by "eliminating its destructive and anarchical tendencies altogether" (ibid: 278).[2] This solution draws on Realist traditional thinking: as Hobbes argued in *Leviathan*, "Covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all" (Hobbes 1985: 223). Therefore the only solution to the thermonuclear dilemma is the transformation of the international system into a *genuine world state*.

In *The Inequality Among Men*, Rousseau develops a hypothetical history of how the society of his modern society had come into being. Even though he gives a comprehensive account of this societal development, he maintains that by "the fortuitous concurrence of several foreign causes" human society has arrived at a

specious social contract with all its injustice and inequalities, both natural and political (Rousseau 2004: 26). It is an illegitimate contract of the strong that constitutes the environment in which self-reflecting individuals are left to fend for themselves; a society Rousseau himself truly despised.[3] In this society, Rousseau summarizes in the beginning of *The Social Contract*, "Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains" (Rousseau 1998: 5). Throughout the rest of the book he develops his ideal vision of how a new and legitimate contract can be designed.

The first move for Rousseau is to contrast civil society with the state of nature, posing the question of how it is possible to live in a society, being subject to its laws, and yet still be as free as one was in the state of nature. The solution, Rousseau contends, starts with the separation of different "wills": first, every individual has his own "particular will", concerned with personal interest about his own advantage; second, the "will of all", which is the aggregate of the number of particular wills; last, the "general will" which is the will that considers what is in the best interest of the whole (ibid.). The general will transcends the other two; we are to think of a group as a single individual, that is society as an organism, then the general will would be if such an individual were to think of what is in its own best interest.

At this moment it is helpful to draw attention to the connection between the "fear of nuclear death" and the emergence of what might be called the only true "general will" of mankind (Craig 2003: 171-172).[4] The desire, or to use Rousseau's vocabulary "will", not to die in a nuclear holocaust is the general will of mankind. Or to put it in another way, it is only by acting on the fear of nuclear death that the people of the earth can build a world state. Moreover, as the new social contract presupposes a particular context and not a dramatic revolutionary context (being not historical, but *logical*) Rousseau asserts, that the "primitive condition can no longer subsist, and the human race would perish unless it changed its mode of existence" (Rousseau 1998: 14). Even so, when taking the thermonuclear dilemma into consideration, the dividing line between logical and historical context becomes blurred, not to say broken. A world state with a general will determined to avoid nuclear holocaust is a Realist possibility. For Rousseau, the contract consists in that "Each of us puts in common his person and his whole power under the supreme direction of the general will; and in return we receive every member as an individual part of the whole" (ibid.: 15). And it is only by making this new contract, that Man achieves the "remarkable change" where individuals lose the freedom to follow their inclinations, but by entering into a social contract they gain *real freedom*; the freedom to maneuver within the benefits which arise from the civil state (ibid.: 19).

Yet, the persistent concern for the state of the world and the absence of world community seems to be the hindrance for establishing a world state. As Morgenthau (1946: 342) concluded in *Politics Among Nations*, "a world state cannot be established under present moral, social, and political conditions". The system of nation states is indeed a system of different communities with their own moral, social, and political traditions. If states emerge out of demand from the bottom up, as Morgenthau here assumes, a world community logically comes prior to a world state. This argument aligns with Rousseau's insistence on banning private associations. As Rousseau (1998: 30) argued, "in order to have a clear declaration of the general will … there should be no partial association in the state". Accordingly, nationalism as Morgenthau (1957: 190) asserted 'has had its day'– there is no room for it in a world state.

The Prospects of Transformation and Mechanisms of Change

While some maintain that a world state is "inevitable", others stress that, because of the intensification of the "material context", a world state is the only functionally solution and therefore would be surprising if it did not happen (Wendt 2003; Deudney 2006). In contrast, contemporary realists such as John Mearsheimer, building on Waltz's structural theorizing, maintain that such change is impossible because of the "first mover problem" where rational states face an environment inhabited by irrational states that are unable to change and thus, as a result, must resort to security maximizing policies that cause insecurity for its counterparts (Mearsheimer 2011). Nevertheless, while the first two accounts offer little guidance as to what mechanism can facilitate such change, the deterministic account of inability of change is also problematic because it, by its wish for theoretical elegance, is unable to explain how the state system that it analyses came into being.[5] Thus, mechanisms for change must be found elsewhere.

In *A Lasting Peace*, Rousseau (1917) delivers the argument for a European Federation with the purpose of a lasting peace among its powers and then a critique of it. In other words, first, it is established that war is undisputedly bad; second, in a system of states, remaining in a "state of nature" towards each other, anarchy and war will prevail; therefore, third, a federation with the power to maintain a lasting peace must be formed (Rousseau 1917).

But Rousseau goes further and elaborates on how a Federation of Europe could be created. After establishing the practical conditions, that such a Federation, must include all great powers, have an effective legislative body, coercive power, and strong enough to match any dissolution. Rousseau imagines that a general assembly of Europe is called for, at which five articles will be presented and instituted as the new constitution of Europe. One might argue that the persuasive power of reason and wisdom alone should be enough to carry through with the plans. Rousseau remains a bit more modest and states that it is only "if they took council of their true interest," that such a federation would come into being (ibid.: 91). However, he asserts that if the project were to fail it would be because "men are crazy, and because to be sane in a world of madmen is in itself a kind of madness" (ibid.: 91).

Distinguishing between "real" and "apparent" interests, Rousseau points out that while a nation's real interest always will be for peace, their apparent interest will always lie the other way (ibid.: 92-101). Therefore, even if such plans were set into motion at a perfect time, "the one thing left [would be] force; and then the question is no longer to persuade but to compel, not to write books but to raise armies" and he continues:

> Accordingly, though the scheme in itself was wise enough, the means proposed for its execution betray the simplicity of the author. He fairly supported that nothing was needed but to convoke a Congress and lay the Articles before it; that they would be signed directly and all be over on the spot. It must be admitted that, in all his projects, this good man saw clearly enough how things would work, when once set going, but that he judged like a child at the means for setting in motion (ibid.: 102).

What Rousseau here is pointing out is what could be termed the omnipresent problem of social planning: the relation between *rationality* and *power*. While rationalist and enlightenment thinkers tend to think that 'knowledge is power,' the relationship between them is more complex. To put it in more theoretical terms, the problem Rousseau has encountered is, as Bent Flyvbjerg (1998: 234) argues, "power has a rationality that rationality does not know. Rationality, on the other hand, does not have a power that power does not know." The relationship between power and

rationality is very much in power's favor: a conclusion Morgenthau also draws in his *Scientific Man Vs Power Politics* (1946). That this asymmetrical relationship is characteristic of international relations is old realist wisdom and international history has almost never failed to show us that power politics has final say in just about anything. Does this, then, mean that such plans to transform the world are impossible? Moreover, are there conditions under which rationality has the ability to affect outcomes?

Some scholars have overemphasized the first part of Rousseau's critique leading us to believe that Rousseau denied the possibility of a lasting peace altogether.[6] However, if we read the second part more carefully the prospects of world government is not that ominous (Rousseau 1917: 95). Trying to show that the project was far from utopian, it develops on St. Pierre's example of Henry IV and Sully's great project to establish a European Federation; Rousseau develops an elaborate scheme, designed with careful planning of how the different powers of Europe could be pinned against each other, so as to fight a war that would end all wars. Despite the elaborate schemes and thorough planning, the project failed. Nevertheless, Rousseau still reminds us that "beyond a doubt, a lasting peace is, under present circumstances, a project ridiculous enough. But give us back Henry the IV and Sully, and it will become once more a reasonable proposal" (ibid.: 111). The pinnacle of change, according to Rousseau, is self-reflection and the ability of acting on that reflection is the only way mankind can hope to change his environment.

Nevertheless, the argument still relies on the use of force: a liable solution for Rousseau, but not in a thermonuclear world. As Waltz points out, it "would be an invitation to prepare for world civil war" and thus the likeliness of thermonuclear war (Waltz 1979: 112). The key question then is: how can there be transformation without the use of force? And by what mechanisms is such change possible?

Recall Flyvbjerg (2001) once again, his conceptualization of power as *relational* rather than a mere *entity* allows for such change to be conceived. He argues, that: "The power of rationality is embedded in stable power relations rather than in confrontations" (Flyvbjerg 1998: 233). Where traditional Realist thought has argued for the indulgence of power politics, because it was assumed that the asymmetrical relationship between the rationality and power to be fixed in favor of the latter, Flyvbjerg has a more positive view of the prospects of rationality. Thus, rather than dismissing rationality all together, Flyvbjerg (1998: 233) point out that there are certain conditions under which rationality can flourish: he explains, "The force of reason gains maximum effect in stable power relations characterized by negotiations and consensus seeking. Hence, the power of rationality can be maintained only insofar as power relations are kept nonantagonistic and stable". The argument presented by Flyvbjerg, provided that power relations remain stable and nonantagonistic, opens up the possibility for rational change of the international system. Although it presently would seem as mere impossibility, we can still conclude that the establishment of a world state, by rational means of argument for Rousseau's "remarkable change" –where willing states give up their military power –, is possible without ending in global civil war.

The existence of thermonuclear weapons might just provide the stability needed to embark on the world state project by rational means. Whether the fear of these weapons really provided stability under the cold war, as Waltz would seem to suggest, I leave unanswered, but the absence of great power war in the last sixty years is undisputable (Waltz 1981; Holsti 1996). Even so, can the power relations remain

nonantagonistic, as Flyvbjerg maintains that they should? The possibility is there, only time will tell if rationality can become truly embedded in international politics.

Philosophical Considerations

There are two good arguments for why the transformation, despite its inherent dangers, of the anarchical state system into a genuine world state is a good idea. First of all, as Campbell Craig points out:

> In the long term deterrence is bound to fail: to predict that it will succeed forever, never once collapsing into a nuclear war, is to engage in a utopian and ahistorical kind of thinking totally contrary to traditional Realist philosophy (Craig 2003:172).

The second argument Craig (2003: 172) gives is that "the unipolar nature of international power politics today provides an unusually propitious opportunity for global state formation". With the absence of balancing in the last twenty years the stable power relations and thus fits with the transformative argument of mechanisms for change in this essay.[7] The argument is nevertheless inconsistent with the normative argument found in a social contract that seeks to abolish private associations. If, Rousseau would argue, we fail to abolish private associations the contract will yet again be a specious contract of the strong. And thus, if we want to maintain philosophical consistency the uni-polar moment is of little use.

However, with regard to the first argument there is a more pressing and devastating reflection to be made. What would it require for a world state to be a "permanent" solution to the thermonuclear dilemma? Rousseau, even by making a "perfect social contract" still has a worrying objection to those who put their hopes of a permanent solution in the world state:

> If Sparta and Rome have perished, what state can hope to endure forever? If we wish to form a durable constitution, let us, then, not dream of making it eternal. In order to succeed we must not attempt the impossible, nor flatter ourselves that we are giving to the work of men a stability which human things do not admit to. (Rousseau 1998:89)

Drawing on Rousseau's point here we might, if we insist on solving thermonuclear dilemma once and for all, reconsider the world state solution. What Rousseau is hinting at here is the same conclusion that Robert Putnam (1993: 17) draws from within his studies of civic traditions in modern Italy, that: "Two centuries of constitution-writing around the world warn us … that designers of new institutions are often writing on water". It is the relationship between the exercise of power and the constitution (i.e., the rational restraint of power) that eventually will result in the collapse of the state. Like the forces of nature working on the terrain, the power relations will eventually demolish the checks and balances put in place to restrain them. It was the relationship between rationality and power that brought the state into being; it will be the same relationship that will ensure its destruction. As Rousseau writes: "the body politic, as well as the human body, begins to die from its birth, and bears in itself the causes of its own destruction" (Rousseau 1998:89).

In sum, claiming that a world state would be able to permanently solve the thermonuclear dilemma, I would argue, then, is having hubristic ideas about the endurance of statehood. As Rousseau contends, the world of men is nowhere near as stable as a lasting world state would require; we will eventually bring down this "permanent solution" and the thermonuclear dilemma would yet again return. If not to a world of nation states, then to one of different antagonized political entities.

Under the assumption that, what has been invented can never be dis-invented; we must live with the possibility that the world can come to an end by our own making. We thus reach the tragic and unsatisfying conclusion, that a world state would only be able to solve the thermonuclear dilemma *temporarily*. Deterrence will eventually fail, yes, *but so too, will a world state*. Which leads us to the suggestive point I want to make in this essay: *the thermonuclear dilemma is the existential premise of international political life*. As there seems to be no permanent solution to the problem, this anomaly does not lend itself to scientific examination. Some dilemmas remain unintelligible and thus by considering the thermonuclear dilemma as an existential premise for political life we are faced to recognize the extent of our misery: *obtaining the power to destroy the world before overcoming the untranscendable human condition*.

If the only possible stance towards the problem remains a normative one, then what about the world state solution? While the thermonuclear dilemma properly will stay with humanity indefinitely, what was set out to answer was: "what, if anything, can we do about it?" Stressing "if anything" we ought to take the construction of a world state seriously because it, to this day, remains the most liable solution to the thermonuclear dilemma. The only thing we can do, as Rousseau also acknowledges, is to give it as good a constitution as possible.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that a world state, which engages with the world community problem, inspired by Rousseau, must ban private associations; that, the only tolerable mechanism of change in a thermonuclear world is through *rational argumentation*, which can only be embedded in stable power relations; and finally, that despite its inevitable decay and destruction, a world state remains the only liable solution to the thermonuclear dilemma. Moreover, if we are to consider the thermonuclear dilemma as an existential premise, then it will never be done with Realist political philosophy and therefore *should* remain at the very center of international political thought.

Notes

1. This essay was originally written for the master's course *Realism in the American Century*, convened by Professor Campbell Craig at the Department of International Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth. The Author wishes to thank Campbell Craig for a great and insightful course, along with the two reviewers, Marc Van Impe and Lucas Van Milders for valuable comments and suggestions.
2. Morgenthau's initial argument, however, called for better diplomacy between nation states (i.e., *accommodation*), as there was no world community to support a world state. Nevertheless, later in his career he returned to the idea of a genuine world state. On this point see Craig (2003 and 2007).
3. For more on how this worldview and argument has been utilized in the field of International Relations, see Waltz, Kenneth (1954 [2001]) *Man, the State and War: a theoretical analysis*, Columbia University Press, pp. 165-186.
4. The "fear of nuclear death" is central to Campbell Craig's thesis in *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*; see especially chapters 4, 5, 7, and conclusion pp. 171-172.
5. For a critique of Waltz's inability to explain change in the international system, see Ruggie, John Gerard (1986) 'Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Towards a Neorealist Synthesis', in Robert O. Keohane (ed.) (1986) *Neorealism and its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 131-157.

6. See especially Morgenthau, *Scientific Man Vs. Power Politics*, pp. 39-40, that by extending Rousseau's critique of modern international thought ignores the fact that Rousseau implored the writings of St. Pierre.
7. With regard to "the absence of balancing", see, for example, Brooks, Stephen and William Wohlforth (2008) *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

References

Brooks, Stephen and William Wohlforth (2008) *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Craig, Campbell (2003) *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau and Waltz*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Craig, Campbell (2007) "Hans Morgenthau and the world state revisited," in Michael Williams (ed.) *Realism Reconsidered: The Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 195-215.

Deudney, Daniel H. (2006) *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Flyvbjerg, Bent (1998) *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice*, translated by Steven Sampson, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Flyvbjerg, Bent (2001) *Making Social Science Matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*, translated by Steven Sampson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Flyvbjerg, Bent (2004) "Phronetic Planning Research: Theoretical and Methodological Reflections," in *Planning Theory & Practice*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 283–306.

Hobbes, Thomas (1651 [1985]) *Leviathan*, London: Penguin Books.

Holsti, Kalevi J. (1996) *The State, War, and the State of War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mearsheimer, John (2011) "Realists as Idealists," in *Security Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3, pp. 424-430.

Morgenthau, Hans J. (1946) *Scientific Man Vs. Power Politics*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, (Midway Reprint, 1974).

Morgenthau, Hans J. (1948) *Politics Among Nations*, 5th. edition, New York: McGraw-Hill.

Morgenthau, Hans J. (1957) "The Paradoxes of Nationalism," in *Yale Review*, No. 46 (June 1957).

Morgenthau, Hans J. (1961) "Death in the Nuclear Age," *Commentary* 32, September.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1754 [2004]) *Discourse On The Origin of Inequality*, New York: Dover Publications Inc.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1756 [1917]) *A Lasting Peace Through the Federation of Europe: and, The State of War*, Translated by C. E. Vaughan, London: Constable and Company Limited.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques (1762 [1998]) *The Social Contract*, translated by H. J. Tozer, London: Wordsworth.

Ruggie, John Gerard (1986) "Continuity and Transformation in the World Polity: Towards a Neorealist Synthesis," in Robert O. Keohane (ed.) *Neorealism and its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 131-157.

Waltz, Kenneth (1954 [2001]) *Man, the State and War: a theoretical analysis*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Waltz, Kenneth (1979 [2010]) *Theory of International Politics*, Reissued Waveland Press, Inc.

Waltz, Kenneth (1981) "The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: More May Be Better," Adelphi Paper number 171, London: International Institute of Strategic Studies.

Wendt, Alexander (2003) "Why a World State Is Inevitable," in *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 491–542.